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Stone and Steel

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When the lights are off, rats tend to scurry out from where they've been hiding. While the light of Lord Nirama's gaze was firmly fixed on the underworld of the Cularin system, there were many rats trapped in the few shadowy places left to them under his regime. Now that Nirama is gone, replaced by a far less discriminating criminal overlord, the system's vermin are free to come out of hiding once again. As the heroes of Cularin are about to learn, even the dark cloud of increased lawlessness may have a silver lining.

"Krael, I don't like it down here."

There was a loud snort from up ahead, followed by three light coughs. Cigarillos had always been Krael's biggest vice; his body was finally starting to show the signs of his two-tin-a-day habit.

"I don't like it either, Vreego, but if half of what the note said was true, we can't miss this. Just think of the profits."

Vreego, a Rodian with a distinct dislike of anything unclean, looked around at the sewage tunnel they were walking through. The worst part of Hedrett's daily outflow was drifting past along a channel of brackish water. "I'm thinking more of the diseases we are liable to catch. Can we please turn back?" His snout, covered in a breather mask and cowl, still turned upward at the imagined stench of the place. "We are lost, anyway."

Krael's face, so piggish the Human could have passed for a Caarite or Ugnaught with a bit of makeup, grimaced. "We ain't lost, and we ain't gonna catch nothing."

The Rodian sighed. "Well, we certainly seem immune to language skills, at any rate."

"You making fun of me?"

Vreego had long since learned not to taunt his business partners too much. Ilb Toranda, that wily Twi'lek snake, had managed to find an excuse not to come, but even his temper would flare at the merest sign of disrespect. Krael, on the other hand, occasionally flew off the handle at imagined slights. Actually insulting him was probably a recipe for disaster -- one to be avoided at all costs.

"No, no. I was just saying that I don't think we paid close enough attention to the directions in the note. That's all." It was a lie, but it

seemed to work.

"Oh. Well, this ain't even a problem. I know exactly where I'm going."

Twenty seconds later, they arrived at a caved-in section of the sewers.

Vreego sighed again and pointed at the massive pile of stone, industrial asphalt, and reinforcing steel. "Let me guess, Krael; this is a clever hologram or secret passage of some kind?"

The Human looked at the blockage for a moment and shook his head. "Oh, I forgot. This part of the sewers got trashed when that Jedi Killer thing was whacked. Apparently some Militia guy slammed him through the street right here." Krael gestured to the rubble. "Guess we'll have to go topside for the rest of the trip."

Vreego watched his partner as the large man found the nearest ladder and began ascending. "Wait a minute. Topside, as in on the street?"

Krael, still climbing, nodded. "Yeah."

The Rodian clenched both hands, using all his willpower not to grab the handles of his blasters. "So the swap isn't down here in the sewers at all? We could have gone the whole way up on the surface?"

Krael reached the sewer grate above his head and started unlocking it. "Ummmm... sure. I guess."

Vreego couldn't help but rest his hands on his guns. "Then why in the name of the Great Hunter have we been wandering around down here for hours?"

Krael popped the lock and looked down at his green associate. "'Cause it's fun?"

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An hour later, Vreego was staring at the largest collection of illegal weapons and armaments he'd ever seen in his life, and that included his time back on Rodia as a starport customs guard. His eyes widened, a terrifying expression on the face of a Rodian, as he looked over a sales booth filled with some of the finest Merr-Sonn handguns ever to come out of the Rimworld colonies.

He wasn't really here to browse, but his meeting with the smugglers behind this fencing event could wait a bit longer. He had some free time, and he'd been disappointed ever since the government's estate sale on Merr-Sonn guns had come to an end.

An attractive Human woman in a sharply cut business suit of black and maroon walked over from one corner of the booth and smiled coolly. "Can I help you find something, sir?" she asked in a passable attempt at his language.

Vreego shook his head. "I want them all, actually. I collect good guns, and yours are the best. I had a chance to buy some pieces a few months ago, but I got busy and the sale ended before I could act." He lifted and dropped

his shoulders, trying to mimic the Human reaction of a shrug.

The woman shook her head and spat a Corellian curse. "That sale was off our backs, you know. Those guns were on order from Merr-Sonn and already paid for. My company took an utter bath on that deal. Almost broke us."

Vreego only wanted to see the merchandise. He had no desire to upset the woman, especially since he didn't know her and wouldn't be able to enjoy the emotional display properly. "Calm, miss. I did not mean to offend you. Could I just take a look at your blaster and projectile rifles?"

Suddenly, a beep on his chronometer reminded him how much time he had left, which was very little.

"Ah, maybe later," he said. "I have a meeting to attend in a few minutes."

The woman's face took on an unreadable expression, and in a low voice that was difficult to make out, she asked, "Are you V?"

The Rodian paused for a moment and then nodded. "I am. You are K?"

With a returned nod, the woman gestured him deeper into the shop and away from other customers. "Correct. The meeting has been postponed until tomorrow. Your agency can keep its retainer and, if you like, you can come back tomorrow at the same time."

As Vreego started to give her an answer, his com link buzzed angrily. Excusing himself for a moment, the Rodian walked to a corner of the booth and brought the link near one of his antennae. "Yes?" He tried not to sound annoyed, but it had been a fairly rough day so far.

"Vree, my good friend, I expected a call by now. You aren't ten cards into a sabacc game already, are you?" It was Ilb, and his Twi'lek condescension was in full force.

Bitting back anything more vitriolic, Vreego answered, "No, but I was delayed in getting to the market. Everything is as we expected and better than we feared. There's a little bit of everything here. I think you will be pleased." He paused long enough to decide how to phrase the next part. "But there will be no meeting today. Meeting tomorrow, they say now. Unavoidable delay, apparently. What do you think I should tell them?"

The Twi'lek chortled. "Tell them you'll be back tomorrow, and try to get me a discount on a six rack of glop grenades. That hunting trip last cycle wiped me out."

Vree sighed to himself; that could have gone worse. "As you wish, Ilb. I'll see what I can do. Good - - ?

Before he could cut off communication, Ilb spoke again. "One quick thing, Vree. I tried to call Krael first, but he's not answering his com. Is there something wrong with his equipment?"

No getting out of it now, he thought with a groan. "Actually, I felt the

need to terminate our contract with him. He was not a good investment, sir, and I believe he would have walked us through a lot of offal before he was done."

Ilb laughed, but more because that was his way than any real chance that he caught the joke. "Oh, well, he was an annoying piece of vermin, wasn't he? No matter. This planet has lots more to choose from. Very well, pick us up some grenades, a new carbine, and a new gunman on your way back. All right?"

Vreego agreed and closed down the link. He loved shopping, but he hated doing it for other people, especially on a planet where slavery was illegal. Still, he knew where he could get dependable thugs on short notice in Hedrett, so the day wasn't a total loss.